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ABSTRACT

The method of writing an intellectual biography and the public career of Earl J. McGrath in the post-World War I cultural milieu are analyzed. One analytical framework is adapted from cultural anthropology and is used to describe the relationship of educational systems to other social systems and to culture as a whole. The second analytic frame, which evolved from evaluation of the 60-year period of McGrath's public career, concerned intellectual changes in physics, philosophy, and psychology. A third analytic frame was the dominant political and economic orientations (the Depression and World War II and also the Viet Nam War period). The data for the analysis came from three sources: McGrath's writings; nine taped interviews with McGrath; and evaluations of his life and contributions by other writers. Five key questions regarding McGrath's career are addressed: (1) What were the significant periods or divisions in McGrath's career? (2) What were his overall contributions to higher education? (3) To what extent did his career redirect the dominant social and intellectual climate of the different historical periods? (4) Can it be demonstrated that he influenced the social and intellectual climate of the different historical periods? (5) To what extent was his career significant in terms of the external cultural context? McGrath was an advocate of the liberal arts and general education, but also advanced the idea that to meet the demands of modern society, higher education curricula must be oriented around important social problems. It is suggested that it would be difficult to place McGrath neatly on a conservative, progressive, reconstructionist spectrum. (SW)

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Intellectual Biography in Higher Education: The Public Career of Earl J. McGrath as a Case Study

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I have two objectives in this paper. The first is to describe a method of writing an intellectual biography. This method is an important alternative for those frustrated by the epistomological limitations of postsecondary education's standard, quantitative research methodology. The second objective is to present a summary analysis of the public career of Earl J. McGrath in terms of the Post World War I intellectual, social, and cultural milieu. Describing this milieu was a subjective and "slippery" task, and the attempt to evaluate McGrath's public career in terms of the milieu was fraught with difficulty. The attempt was justified, however, because without such an approach I would have been limited to spelling out the details of yet another life.

The Art of the Intellectual Historian

Van Baumer has pointed out that intellectual history is a relatively new discipline whose rise corresponded to the demand for synthesis, an integration of facts "after a century and more of intensive fact-finding in the various fields of knowledge. . . ." Van Baumer stated that while scientific research msut go on, "with analysis there must be synthesis." Intellectual history draws its materials from many specialized fields and "tries to find out whether the parts of a civilization add up to the whole. Thus, along with Gestalt psychology, cultural anthropology, and Whitehead's philosophy of organism, all of which emphasize the 'whole'; it is one of the signs of the times." (Van Baumer, p. 4)

Unlike the historian of religion or philosophy or the historian of ideas, who "will also select a single idea . . . and trace its history," the intellectual historian "studies clusters of ideas." That is, he or she studies "climates

of opinion." For the intellectual historian, "climate of opinion" designates "the complex of assumptions in terms of which the majority of men in a given society think and talk and act; the idiom they use to express themselves, the way they have of explaining phenomena." While attempting a synthesis, the intellectual historian must safeguard against the tendency to overgeneralize "the 'mind' of an age" and must avoid "dividing intellectual history into watertight 'periods' for the sake of neatness." (Van Baumer, pp. 4-7) Beyond this, the intellectual historian has to understand "No age, however great, sees reality whole. no age has a monopoly of the truth, for the reason that a price has to be paid for creativity. By encouraging certain forms of creation, an age discourages others. In proportion as it opens up new vistas, it closes down on others." (Van Baumer, p. 12)

Karier addresses the same general problem in saying, "The verbal reconstruction of the past thus involves an imaginative, creative act." He immediately adds, however, that history is "more than pure fiction and illusion. A picture of the past leaves the world of fictional writers when the historian insists on documentary evidence to establish the validity of his story." While the historian seeks validity, he or she must realize validity is not a synonym for certitude. Karier thinks "there can no more exist a definitive history as there can exist a definitive present." There are only "many pictures of the past that are judged more or less true and more or less useful by the living present." (Karier, p. xvii) Toynbee used a personal tone in describing the subjective, creative, existential nature of the historian's task:

> Evidently his nationality, his social milieu, and his age, between them, will in large measure determine the standpoint from which he views the world panorama. In fact, like each and all of us, he is more or less the slave of historical relativity. The only personal advantage that he can claim is that he happens also to be a historian, and is therefore at least aware that he himself is a

> piece of sentient flotsam on the eddying surface of the stream of time. Realizing this he knows that his fleeting and fragmentary vision of the passing scene is no more than a caricature of the surveyor's chart. God alone knows the true picture. Our individual human apercus are shots in the dark. (Toynbee, p. 16)

Analytical Framework

Writing a intellectual biography is a complex undertaking which requires a variety of techniques, some of which might be unique to a particular project. Three analytic frameworks, which have both complementary and contradictory elements, were combined in my study of McGrath. One framework was adapted from cultural anthropology, one from intellectual history, and one from political-economic history.

The framework adapted from cultural anthropology was used to describe the relationship of educational systems to other social systems and to the culture as a whole. Implicit in this analysis was a classification of the theoretical and practical range of influence available to a single educator. This framework, tripartite in nature, provided a normative basis for evaluating McGrath's career in terms of his contributions to higher education. It made it possible to balance the question "What more should he have done?" with the question "What more was it possible for him to have done, given cultural reality?" At the same time, the tripartite structure of the framework -- education and educators can be "progressive," "conservative," or "reconstructionist" -- illuminated McGrath's career in that at different times, he properly could be placed at different points on the spectrum suggested by the framework.

The second analytic frame evolved from an analysis of the sixty-year period of McGrath's public career. The four aspects of the frame, three different intellectual revolutions and a dramatic socio-intellectual development, helped provide an understanding of the motion of the culture over the last half century.

The three revolutions were (1) the revolution in physics, (2) the revolution in philosophy, and (3) the revolution in psychology. The socio-intellectual development was the revolutionary consciousness of planetary finiteness and the closely related growth of bureaucracy. The analytic frame described the intellectual and, to a lesser extent, social milieu within which McGrath lived and worked.

It seemed clear that if one were to successfully evaluate McGrath's career, as well as to appreciate his intellectual development and particular stances, it would be necessary first to provide the backdrop against which his life could be placed. To this end, I synthesized and evaluated the ideas of a variety of authorities who, in addition to being experts in specialized areas of knowledge, had demonstrated an ability to see and think holistically. Each of these persons, like McGrath himself, had shown in their writings that they understood the problems of life are complex and that the most important of them will never be solved by tunnel-vision specialists. For the combination of expert knowledge and vision, I selected these significant contemporary thinkers: Jacob Bronowski, Fritjof Capra, Kenneth Clark, John Dewey, Rene Dubos, Jacques Ellul, Sigmund Freud, John W. Gardner, Robert Heilbroner, Carl Jung, Thomas Kuhn, Herbert Marcuse, Jacob Needleman, Robert Pirsig, Theodore Roszak, E.F. Schumacher, Arnold Toynbee, and Alfred North Whitehead.

From the synthesis and evaluation of those men's ideas, some key points emerged which proved useful in the analysis of McGrath's life. Especially important were the following: (1) the concept of moral relativity and the related confusion of means and ends, issues which emerged from the discussion of the revolution in physics; (2) the tendency for modern philosophy to take its cues from science in developing analytical techniques; (3) the realization that the cosmological wound inflicted by Copernicus and the biological wound

inflicted by Darwin diminished in importance next to the psychological wound inflicted by Freud, Carl Jung, and Erich Fromm, among others; and (4) the realization of many of these thinkers that the development of the vision necessary for the successful evolution of a society requires a genuinely creative effort on the part of many citizens, and that such creativity will not come from people psychologically emasculated by rationalists who insist on the domination of the conscious mind. This second analytic frame was the most important and was developed at considerable length, for the ideas woven in its structure became to the analysis of McGrath's life what the carpet is to the picture.

The third of the analytic frames was the periodization associated with tradtional historical presentations and their dominant political and economic orientations. While periodization is clearly inappropriate for analyzing broad intellectual changes which sweep over time, it is appropriate for organizing an individual's life, in so far as points of change or departure can be seen in most people's lives. In McGrath's case, the Depression and World War II clearly marked off different periods of his intellectual development, as did the Viet Nam War period to a lesser extent. I also used a secondary periodization which was based on McGrath's different professional positions.

Methodology

The data for the analysis came from three sources: (1) McGrath's writings; (2) nine taped interviews with McGrath; and (3) evaluations of his life and contributions by other writers.

The analysis and evaluation of McGrath's public career were organized around five key questions, which were answered within the analytic frameworks described above:

1. What were the significant periods or divisions in McGrath's career?

2. What were his overall contributions to higher education?

3. To what extent did his career reflect the dominant social and intellectual climate of the different historical periods?

4. Can it be demonstrated that he influenced the social and intellectual climate of the different historical periods?

5. To what extent was his career significant in terms of the external cultural context?

To answer the question "What were the significant periods or divisions in McGrath's career?" I relied first on his own periodization of his public life, a three part division which emerged during the interviews. I then subdivided the three large periods according to the emphasis found in selected McGrath speeches, articles, monographs, and books.

The answer to the second question, "What were his overall contributions to higher education?" was derived largely from the public record of specific accomplishments which was revealed in both McGrath's own writing and in evaluations of his career by other authors. In addition, his overall contribution was evaluated subjectively in terms of the influence he was able to exert from high office at both the institutional and national levels; in terms of his scholarly production; in terms of his effectiveness as a consultant; and in terms of his championing the concept of general education in an age dominated by rationalism and reductionism.

It was possible to suggest an answer to the question "To what extent did his career reflect the dominant social and intellectual climate of the different historical periods?" by analyzing specific examples of McGrath's actions and thoughts in terms of the second analytic frame, the description of the cultural context.

"Can it be demonstrated that he influenced the social and intellectual climate of the different historical periods?" was a question that could not be answered with any certainty. Measuring the effect of a single person on history remains an idiosyncratic activity.

Finally, the examination of McGrath documents, pronouncements, and acts, especially as they established him as one who at times in significant ways stood out from the mass caught in a common cultural web, allowed me to suggest an answer to the question "To what extent was his career significant in terms of the external cultural context?"

Findings and Conclusions

During a career spanning more than half a century in higher education, McGrath remained a man of subtle ironies. While he was for years a staunch, some would say conservative, advocate of the liberal arts and general education, he at the same time repeatedly advanced the idea that to meet the demands of a modern, shifting society, higher education curricula, in the best progressive tradition, must be oriented around social problems of real importance to individuals. In some later work, he clearly called for educators with moral vision to lead the society out of a bleak mechanistic wilderness. Of course, much of the apparent irony in the movement between conservative, progressive, and reconstructionist positions is clarified by understanding that in his mature academic life, McGrath never felt comfortable with the simple dichotomies that in education, as in the other realms of Western society, were the insidious result of the dominance of rational technique. That is, for most it became necessary, as well as fashionable, to label people according to the techniques they would use to achieve certain ends: Robert Hutchins was a "conservative" for supporting the use of Great Books to preserve the past and

perhaps retard progress; John Dewey was a "progressive" for orienting education around real problems and the immediate needs of the individual; Theodore Brameld was a "reconstructionist" for believing education as a social institution could almost blithely lead a crusade to overcome society's ills.

People who have suffered years of training in an educational system that preaches the beauty and wisdom of apparent rationality and consistency will be frustrated by the attempt to place McGrath neatly on a conservative, progressive, reconstructionist spectrum. He has defended the past, especially in his sympathy for the unique mission of the church-related liberal arts college, and warned that unless colleges and universities face up to immediate social problems, totalitarian forces will win the day in a demonstration of power, untamed by the spiritual considerations which make us whole. He celebrated the fact that largely due to his efforts as United States Commissioner of Education, millions of American school children began the study of foreign languages; at the same time he encouraged the development of new fields of human exploration, such as the health sciences. And while he knew well the limits born of political and social reality, he at times sounded downright evangelical in describing the leadership responsibilities of educators.

McGrath's personal effectiveness was limited by cultural forces which in a complex, technical world rapidly shrink the power of the individual. It took the launching of Sputnik to achieve the sorts of federal appropriations scattered people had advocated for years. It took the Brown decision and raped ghettos to advance the cause of equal rights and racial equality. In many institutions, it took student riots and tightening budgets to force brick and mortar administrators to once again examine the purposes of their institutions.

McGrath's career supports the thesis of Kaplan and Manners: "So while we would adopt a position which does not assign primary causal import to a single subsystem under all circumstances we would, following what seems to us to have been a fruitful tradition in the social science, opt for a kind of limited technoeconomic determinism tempered by ideology, tempered by social structure, and sometimes even tempered by personality." (Kaplan and Manners, p. 161)

Ideological idealism and the expectations of a moral personality in McGrath's case were often tempered -- a less pejorative and in this instance more appropriate word than "compromised" -- by technoeconomic realities. This is to suggest that McGrath was a pragmatic-idealist who knew full well that the rhetoric of idealism must at times be modified in action by the demands of the real world. He often was willing to adjust his visionary impulses, for he understood that in their intransigence, inconoclastic idealists too often become an impotent, smug minority content to take the hemlock as their proclaimed enemies are left a clear field.

If McGrath failed to speak out passionately on civil rights as Commissioner of Education, it was because he understood the relationship of that issue to many other factors -- for instance the power of the southern block in Congress -- and made the judgment that to raise a storm might well do more harm than good. If he did not shout from the towers about what some perceived to be the immorality of Viet Nam, it probably was not because he was insensitive to the issue or was the pawn of some "establishment" power structure, but because he believed that in a time of severe social stress, a voice of reason and moderation would better serve the interests of the whole country than yet another shrill voice of polarized idealism.

Somewhat differently, if he failed to get a federal appropriations bill passed, it was truly a matter of priorities that would not be changed without Russian technical assistance in the form of Sputnik. If his consistent advocacy of general education bore relatively little fruit in hundreds of institutions until recently, it was because until recently even many of the most intelligent were enjoying the sleep of reason, not realizing that while they slept they were being dehumanized.

The understanding and judgment McGrath exhibited in his latter years developed over a rich life. He early enjoyed the advantages of a warm, moral family experiences; a varied and stimulating education; and an enviable apprenticeship under Samuel Capen. These years were a prelude to a period as a senior administrator, a time during which he matured as a pragmatic-idealist in the service of his country. In more reflective years, as a senior statesman, McGrath was a productive scholar whose speeches, consultant services, and publications embodied the wisdom he gained during the other periods of his life.

Despite the restraints on the individual found in a highly technical society, McGrath did make many important things happen, as even a cursory survey of his public career clearly shows: creating the Navy V-12 Program; creating the Off-Duty Education Program; helping lay the groundwork for federal aid to education; helping write the 1947 Truman Commission Report, with its emphasis on expanding community colleges, providing better programs of adult education, giving greater financial assistance to the economically deprived, and accelerating the recruitment of minority students -- all aimed at providing greater access to higher education through expanding the role of the federal government; providing the impetus for a new interest in the study of foreign languages; overseeing the birth of higher education centers at Columbia and Temple; advising

in the founding of Eisenhower College; and more. He used his curious mixture of idealism and practicality to do things which cannot be done by either those whose idealism is not tempered by the sense of restraint and accommodation that comes from a knowledge of political reality, or by those whose practicality is not infused to a degree with the zeal of the visionary.

McGrath's greatest contribution to higher education was his persistent reminding that the path to self-knowledge cannot be followed by using ever-more sophisticated techniques. Over the years, in a variety of forms and in hundreds of forums, he enlarged upon Andreski's idea that "Whatever happens in the instrumental exact sciences, we can be sure that in matters where intellectual and moral considerations mesh, the struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness will never end." (Andreski, p. 237) McGrath's feeling about the limits of scientism and the need for broadly defined religion was made clear in the following passage:

> ... here's where I am in religion and the mystery of life, if you will. When the new telescope penetrates the universe another 1,000 light years and finds something we didn't know about before, then somebody says, "Well . . . religion, thinking about the eternal condition of man, what's going to happen in the long run, . . . I don't want to bother with that business." I think that's all right to take that position practically, but the mystery to me about life is this.
>
> You know, I've been through positivism, and as far as it goes it's not too bad. It's a terribly simple philosophy of life and the imaginative person could not be satisfied with positivism. . . . when they tell me that this universe, so far as they know, is four billion years old, and they keep extending it, then I want to ask the question where did it come from in the beginning. . . . If you're a reasonable person you have to ask that question. I'm not saying you have to then design a God that reaches in every day and lays your life out for you or interfers with it or whatever. [But], you have to ask that question. (McGrath, 9 November, pp. 50-51)

In a related, timely observation about the history of civilization Needleman has said this:

> Throughout the history of civilization the great traditions have offered human beings a door on the other side of which there stretches the long and difficult path to self-knowledge. But it is said of the guards who stand behind that door that their sole task is to conduct men forward; no promise is given that those who are distracted will ever find their way back again. Legend also has it that what is nectar on the far side is poison on this side. Therefore, in the past the door has been well guarded by the institutions and forms of Tradition.
>
> What does it mean, then, that these guardians seem to have vanished in the present age? (Needleman, p. 170)

In responding to the question "Did life just get so big and so complex that wise men couldn't handle it anymore?" McGrath spoke to one of the important points raised by Needleman:

> I'm not sure wise men couldn't handle it anymore, but, of course, there are a very few wise men. I think that the trend . . . in the last fifty years in philosophy and social sciences, and even in the humanities . . . has been away from integrated thinking. . . . The sheer abundance of information and the growing complexity of the world had a lot of people very much disturbed, spiritually if you will. What was a very simple cosmos, what was a very simple ontology . . . became very complicated, and this poses a real problem today. You almost can go back to the Garden of Eden and the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. One could make a case like this: it may be that the human enterprise has reached a stage in which it is no longer possible within the limits of the human mind to comprehend what it is about. (McGrath, 28 April, p. 14)

McGrath would say our civilization has been distracted for too long by the false promises of rationality and the excesses of scientism. Unlike the masses who forsook tradition, he became one of the most ardent and outspoken champions of the education necessary for the preservation of holistic people, an education that could secure the future not only of tradition, but of the civilization itself. To this end he offered "my credo":

> I believe that what someone has called "the knowledge industry" will skirt its main efforts from a producer of intellectual goods to an agency serving the

> enduring needs of a humane culture. I do not believe that research and technology and the dissemination of specialized knowledge will, should, or could be halted. I do believe that a larger portion of our money, personnel, time, and efforts in the academic enterprise will be devoted to the improvement of the quality of life through a better understanding and fuller satisfaction of the individual's and society's needs. I believe that the enterprise of education will, therefore, be more concerned as Plato was with the ultimate character of the good and the just life in the good and just society. I believe with Rene Dubos that the good life will not be found in more creature comforts and further technological conveniences, but rather in the reestablishment of a humane community in which human dignity, respect for our fellow men, and compassionate concern for the welfare of all will prevail. I believe with Toynbee and Mumford that the destiny of humanity is in the balance, as I believe with Walter Lippman that only the centers of higher learning can tip the scales in favor of survival under conditions which make survival worthwhile. This is the momentus task before us. It is an arresting responsiblity. Micawber-like optimism or Cassandra-like pessimism will get us nowhere. Realistic optimism and dedication to a hard job may win the day for our culture, for us in education and gain the plaudits for a grateful people. (McGrath 1975, p. 4)

Perhaps the major reason for McGrath's success over time was his ability to keep growing intellectually. Despite his important but youthful flirtation with positivism, an approach to life he came to detest, he was able to develop a clear concept of holistic man and to nurture a respect for the fundamental mystery of the universe. As he grew intellectually, McGrath was very much aware of the implications of the revolutions in physics, philosophy, and psychology. He said this of his mentor Samuel Capen: "Dr. Capen had little sympathy for the ethical relativism which characterizes contemporary conduct. . . . " (McGrath 11 November, p. 1) McGrath shared Capen's lack of sympathy for the aspect of the revolution in physics which encouraged people to believe the theory of relativity or the "uncertainty principle" referred to men's and women's moral lives.

In the 1961 article "The Future of the Protestant College," he touched on a single result of the revolution in philosophy which had seen the concerns of classical philosophy dashed by waves of enthusiasm for positivism and its stepchild linguistic analysis: "Some [Protestant colleges], under the influence of a positivistic philosophy and the application of scientific method to the whole range of human experience, permitted relativism and an easy adaptability to events to determine institutional objectives, faculty qualifications, and student behavior." (McGrath 1961, p. 47) Earlier he had noted the lifelessness which stemmed from "the indiscriminate application . . . of scientific methods of scholarship in the fields of language, literature, philosophy, and history." (McGrath 1959, p. 116)

The best example of McGrath's condemnation of the revolution in psychology is found in an anecdote related by Kiester. The anecdote not only condemns the rational, analytic approach to psychology, but also shows Dr. McGrath's intense concern about disembodied knowledge:

> "I am ashamed of what I tuaght when I was a psychology instructor," he remarked. . . . "Ninety-five percent of them were never going to do any more in psychology. Yet we examined the central nervous system from Labor Day to Thanksgiving. The rods and cones of the retina. The bones in the middle ear. Hot and cold spots in the fingers. All this trash that I had to take because I was taking a master's in psychology I embodied in a one-year course, and those poor suckers had to learn it and give it back to me. And here we had the psychology of propaganda, Hitler running all over Europe, they psychology of advertising, neuroses everywhere, to say nothing of crowd psychology, which they wouldn't even hear about unless they took two or three more courses. All of that could have been bundled into a one-year course which would have been a value to all of them." (Kiester, pp. 23-24)

There is no doubt that during the 1930's McGrath's career reflected the dominant social and intellectual climate of the time. At Buffalo and in Washington he performed particular bureaucratic functions, and more important, he was at least in part sympathetic to the rational mentality exemplified by

mechanism. McGrath, however, was somewhat out of tune with the times from the early 1940's onward. He kept a vital aspect of himself apart, while the vast majority of men and women were content to advance themselves materially in a variety of bureaucratic structures through the ever-more-skillful use of rational and apparently logical techniques. At the same time he headed an enormous bureaucratic unit in Washington, he continued to believe that there were serious flaws in the system and that it would be practically, as well as morally, indefensible to simply go along with things as they were. He knew, for example, that to fulfill the democratic promise of a good education for all citizens who wanted it, large sums of federal money would have to be injected into the system; and he knew that higher education would have to offer broader based curricula if it was to prepare people ready to accept the burdens of citizenship in an increasingly complex society.

This is not to say, however, that in the last twenty or thirty years McGrath's career has been utterly at odds with the dominant culture. He was a pragmatic-idealist who retained a sophisticated understanding of what is necessary to get things done in the real world. While he was no mere servant of power, he appreciated the demands and restraints of power. Unlike those who in the name of idealism insist on a dichotomous choice between being a servant of power or a servant of truth, McGrath rejected such a one-dimensional approach to life. In exemplifying the holistic man, he was different from both the majority, whose lives are largely determined by blind obedience to pragmatic rationality, and from the minority, whose lives are largely determined by blind, or on occasion, naive obedience to uncontrolled idealism.

It is impossible to empirically demonstrate that McGrath influenced the social and intellectual climate of the last half-century. One can posit, nevertheless, that he has in fact influenced the culture through his numerous

speeches, consultant services, publications, and other specific acts, especially as United States Commissioner of Education. The recent interest in curriculum innovation along the lines of liberal or general education in many institutions of higher education offers one kind of evidence of the McGrath influence, and the effects of the Truman Commission Report with which he was much involved continue to ripple through higher education.

Perhaps it is most difficult to state the extent to which McGrath's career was significant in terms of the external cultural context. I would agree with the cultural anthropologists Kaplan and Manners that personality becomes a less potent factor of change as the culture becomes more complex and is increasingly dominated by the technoeconomic aspects of advanced industrialism. However, even in a civilization whose course appears determined by technoeconomic considerations, certain individual's, like Earl McGrath, stand out from the mass as examples of different possiblities.

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